

# OUR ANTEDILUVIAN ANCESTORS-- BILL STONEHATCHET GETS HIS FRIEND TOMMY SKINCLOTHES TO DRESS UP AS SANTA CLAUS.

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## The Strange Story of a Fiddle



WRITTEN FOR THE SUNDAY REPUBLIC.

Long, long ago there lived beyond the Alps a maker of violins.

And so wondrously sweet were the instruments he made, so rich and pure in tone, that the man became famous, and his work was known and prized throughout the land.

But it happened that a sickness came upon the town and many died, and the Great Master fell ill amongst the rest, and very soon the leeches standing around his bed shook their heads gravely, saying his end was near.

And hearing this, the sick man raised himself, making signs as though to speak, and one of his relatives, who had come to see him die and share what might be left, bent down to catch the words; then, drawing his labored breath in gasps, the Master said:

"Give me the fiddle that I finished last."

And they gave it to him. Then, taking it in his weak hands, he touched it lovingly and held it to his breast, saying the while: "This was my last, yet this, too, is my best," and to the fiddle he said:

"Far rather would I have thy tones imprisoned forevermore within thy wooden breast than know thy soul might wall forth pitifully in pain beneath the bow of one who loves not Art for Art's own sake."

"Would that some power would strike thee dumb, and yet take off the curse should ever hand of genius touch thy strings!"

And saying this the Master paused and sighed; then, falling back, he yielded up his spirit. But those who stood about his bed, hearing his last words, said:

"Poor man, he raved. How could a man speak to his fiddle thus?"

And so when they had buried him they carried all his goods and held high holiday, feasting and reveling in the house that had been his.

And one amongst them cried, "Come, let us take this fiddle that he loved and see what it is worth! His work was always prized, so now he's dead and never can do more, surely his instruments will rise in price!"

"Agreed!" cried all, and so they took the fiddle to a musician held in high repute, saying: "This is our kinsman's last, and he did say his best. What will you give for it?"

And the musician took it eagerly, and eyed it with an air of criticism, saying: "If, as you say, it is his best, it should indeed be good; but let me see."

Then, taking up his bow, he drew it lightly across the strings. But at the very first touch of his hand a sound broke from the fiddle setting on edge the teeth of all that heard it—a shrill, discordant shriek, that would not cease, but circled round and echoed in their ears like the despairing cry of some poor soul in hell.

And all the dead man's people looked afraid, but the musician turned on them in wrath, crying: "You've cheated me! This squealing thing was never made by him!"

However, they told him the tale of the dead man's last words; still he was wroth, and thought they lied, yet, taking up the fiddle once again, he drew his bow across the strings; but all in vain—for this time it was dumb.

And now the great man's anger knew no bounds; so, pitching the poor fiddle at those who brought it, he called his serving men to drive them from the house.

And so the Master's relatives departed in hot haste, taking the despoiled fiddle with them.

And as they passed along discussing what to do next with this cursed thing, they saw upon the road in front of them a poor blind beggar with a child and a dog.

And one cried out, "See, is that not Antonio, our blind cousin who fiddles at the country fairs for a living?"

"Aye," said the rest. "Let's make as though we did not know and pass him by, lest he should beg of us."

But Antonio had heard the voices, for, being blind, it happened he heard quicker; and as he felt his way, led by the dog and followed by the child, he said:

"Ho, Bianca! who is it comes this way?" And the girl answered:

"So, stopping still, Antonio doffed his cap, calling aloud:

"My kinsman, behold! My little girl and I are travel-stained and wearied out and spent. My fiddle, too, on which our bread depends, was broken by some roisterer at the fair. Might I, then, crave your pity for this child and beg for rest and food beneath your roof?"

So saying, Antonio paused; but the rich men replied:

"What now, thou brazen beggar, thou fiddler at fairs! What impudence!"

Then said the poor blind man:

"My kinsman—the Great Master—will succor me, I know." To which they cried:

"Know then that he is dead! And what is more, was mad before he died, for the last instrument he made squeals like a cat whose tail is being twisted, or else remains quite dumb."

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For the blind fiddler, ragged though he was, and wearied out and faint for want of food, felt that within him which the others lacked, and, feeling it, thought, "Surely a time must come when I shall triumph, though I am but blind."

And so the three limped on—Antonio and his faithful dog, and little Bianca—sadly footsore, too, shedding big tears and holding her father's hand.

Thus they came to the gates of the town—a sorry group, head-and-antlers asked the sentry, saying:

"Tell me, good man, is there aught of merrymaking in the town this night where perchance my fiddle might have a welcome and earn us a night's lodging?"

And the sentry replied:

"Nay, I know not. Yet, stay, if so your music's good enough, our Mayor doth entertain a mighty Prince to-night, and there will be brave doings at his house. Go there; it may be thou canst earn a penny."

So blind Antonio went, for he knew the town well, though there were few as his rich cousin who still remembered him.

And when they came before the Mayor's house they saw a mighty concourse of gallants and fair dames and wrestlers and musicians and servants, some having come in waiting on the Prince and others being summoned by the Mayor to do his Highness honor.

And Antonio and Bianca and the dog, approaching shyly, stood upon the outskirts of the crowd. Just at this moment, too, the master of the ceremonies, waving a white wand, came walking backwards and forwards, as he did, to get his head nearly touched the buckles on his shoes.

And Bianca, filled with delight at the brave show, forgot how tired she was and cried:

"Oh, father, here comes the great Prince!"

And it was, for the concert provided by the Mayor in honor of his most illustrious guest was about to take place in the open air, and the Prince and his host and many beautiful ladies came out to listen to it and sat on a high dais in sight of all the people.

And chief amongst the court musicians sat the man in whose hands the master's fiddle had played such evil pranks, and at a sign from the conductor he arose and commenced to open the concert.

And mightily satisfied he seemed with himself, though he merely kept time and made no mistakes, and that was about all that could be said of his performance, yet every one clapped him very politely, just because it was the right thing to do.

But scarcely had the applause ceased when a strange thing happened. On the evening air arose a melody so wondrously sweet that each one held his breath, not knowing whence it came. And higher it rose, and fell, and rose again, swelling like the song of some full-throated bird, and anon walling forth in weird, melodious strains like voices from some place beyond this earth. And then it ceased, and all was still again. And the crowd, listening awestruck till the last faint note had winged its way to heaven, began to whisper:

"Who can this fiddler be, who plays upon our heartstrings with his bow, making our tears flow 'e'en against our will, reviving memories buried long ago and raising visions of heaven and paradise?"

And as the people thus spoke, questioning each other, the Prince was seen to beckon eagerly to the grand courtier whose office was that of master of ceremonies. And having spoken with him, and received some order from his Highness, the courtier advanced toward the crowd, the people making way on every side. And after looking to the right and to the left, and not seeming to see what he was seeking, he looked perplexed and said:

"Good people, is there any amongst you who can point out the man who has just played?"

And quite on the extreme edge of the crowd some voice answered:

"Here, my lord, is he. A poor, blind man, weary and travel-stained." And, hurrying forward, the grand man beheld Antonio, humbly standing, cap in hand, his sightless eyes uplifted to the face of him they saw not, and with his other hand holding the dead man's fiddle.

"Come, come, my man," cried the courtier, hurriedly. "My Prince commands your presence, and he brooks no delay." So saying, they proceeded to the dais, and surely a stranger company had never been marshaled into the presence of a Prince! First came the master of the ceremonies, waving his white wand as he advanced with mingled steps, and next, ragged Antonio, led by his gaunt and hungry-looking hound; next, little Bianca, open-eyed and shy, fearing some punishment might befall her father for fiddling thus unbidden in such grand company.

But the great Prince happened to be a learned man, well skilled in all the arts, and having heard Antonio play, he knew that here was one of those rare giants among men—a genius. So, calling the poor blind

man to his side he bade him to tell his story; and he told of poverty and blindness and neglect, and lastly, too, of how he'd met his cousin on the road that very day, receiving at their hands the fiddle, and told its tale (whereat the fiddler in the Prince's band turned green with rage).

And, having heard the tale from first to last, the Prince replied: "Tis well, Antonio, thy troubles have now ceased, for henceforth thou shalt be chief amongst all musicians at our court. And leisure shalt thou have to commune with thy fiddle when thou wilt, for well we know that men who play like this play at the call of one greater than Kings, giving scant heed to the applause of men, but pouring out the fullness of their soul like incense at the very gates of heaven. But thou shalt never want for aught in life, for food and raiment for thy child and thee shall be provided. Such is our gracious will, and we will add a hundred crowns in gold."

And all the people hearing this were glad, for they now knew Antonio to be a townsman of their own, and kin to the Great Master who had died, and so in all the honor done to him each felt he had a part.

So, when the Prince departed on the morrow, returning to the country where he reigned, Antonio with Bianca and the dog went too, and there they lived in honor many years, Antonio's fame spreading throughout the land.

But the rich cousins, caring no more to work, but living idly on their unearned gold, found their inheritance soon dwindled down, so that perforce they had to sell their house, and then at length, having spent their last crown, they had to go and till the ground for others.

Ourselves to the Bride.

The Bride: "I told hubby I was going to give him something of my own cooking, and he said I'd better try it on the dog first. Wasn't that a cruel suggestion?"

Her Boston Friend: "Very. And I thought your husband was so fond of dogs!"—San Francisco Wasp.

In Hades.

The shades of Socrates: "Is there any chance of seeing a good play to-night?"

"Only the ghost of a show," replied the founder of the Cynic school.—Yale Record.

An Eye to Business.

Mistress: "Did you bring any references with you?"

Cook: "No'm. I thought I'd get the place first."—Detroit Free Press.

Asked and Answered.

"Why is it," asked the jolly party, "that you are always borrowing trouble?"

"Because," answered the melancholy individual, "it is the only thing I can borrow without security."—Chicago News.

His Measure.

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Well, I don't wish to knock, but he's a fellow who never carries an umbrella that you'd consider worth stealing."—Chicago Record-Herald.

Hopefully Said.

"Is he married?"

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The New School.

"Now, Mr. Dauber, I bought this picture sheep so odder day—what school of painting would you call it?"

"Boarding school," undoubtedly.—Ally Sloper.

1—"What have we here? It must be a new kind of—"

2—"Cactus plant! Now this is really a most important discovery. It's curious how it could have escaped the observation of other—"

3—"Scientists. Yet its behavior is extremely unusual for a cactus plant."

4—"And I now perceive that I was mistaken. It was not a cactus. It was a hedge hog."

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